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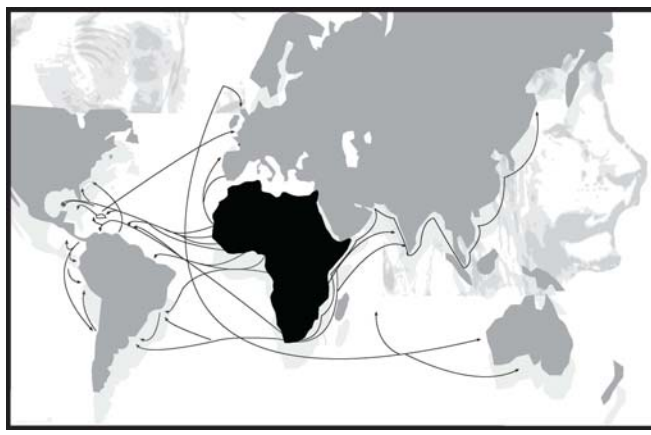
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*George Lamming the Existentialist*

*(Working Paper 006)*

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## **Abstract**

“George Lamming the Existentialist”

This essay argues that George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* offers important tropes in black existential thought that are synchronous with Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, but with a more detailed exploration of the concept of political complicity through his portrait of the phenomenon of slime and its correlate, the slimy individual. The author also discusses Lamming’s treatment of the Fanonian motif of colonizing notions of normative development.

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## Introduction

*I'm also aware, in a certain way, that for us  
our politics is central to our aesthetics.*

—— George Lamming<sup>1</sup>

There are many ways to do justice to a great writer. One way is flattery through the art of imitation. But such a path would only insult that writer since, in the end, it is to suffer the fate of all imitation, the fate of always falling short because of being measured by a standard that could never be one's own. It is a fate wrought with the gnawing consciousness of the unreal. For in the world of the prototype, there is no worse fate, at least when it comes to works of art, than to be *typical*. Yet justice must be given its due. Much depends on this. The deed that constitutes such achievement must be accorded by the only world that can do so, the world that constantly unfolds as "ours." Many options await, but I offer two. First, make it appear. And second, ritualize it by building upon it with the creative force that constitutes its breath.

## Existential dimensions

That George Lamming is a great Caribbean writer is without dispute. In the world of analysis, this observation calls for the task of determining what *type* of writer he is. As many before him who made words meet in paper and ink, he exemplifies the complexity of the Caribbean spirit that defies a singular conclusion. In many ways, this means that he is, essentially, always a little beyond himself, and in that way, he beckons to us that fundamental incompleteness that we all share. True, we could take the age-old route of "guilt by association." Lamming, after all, took up company with such ravel-rousers as Richard Wright and Frantz Fanon. The evidence is manifold—Wright's introduction to Lamming's classic novel *In the Castle of My Skin*; Lamming's conversations with Fanon on the Algerian struggle at the 1956 Black Writer's Congress in Paris. But in the end, these are associations. Friendship and tea—or better yet, coffee with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone De Beauvoir offered lively conversations for Paul Nizan during their university days, but not enough to make that eventually martyred Communist an existential one. No,

the existential here faces a moment of its own suspension of its virulent critique of preceding essences for the sake of some ground rules for its own, paradoxical appearance. We must let some of Lamming's self appear in his own words so that we may consider the man constituted by those words in the hope, ironically, of going beyond the man himself for the precious gifts he offered by his thought. So I begin with a quotation from his first major work, from his beginning, which, ironically he chose to begin with a reflection on the completion or beginning of his ninth year:

"RAIN, RAIN, RAIN . . . my mother put her head through the window to let the neighbour know that I was nine, and they flattered me with the consolation that my birthday had brought showers of blessing. The morning laden with cloud soon passed into noon, and the noon neutral and silent into the sodden grimness of an evening that waded through water. . . . Nothing mattered but the showers of blessing and the eternal will of the water's source. And I might have accepted the consolation if it weren't that the floods had chosen to follow me in the celebration of all my years, evoking the image of those legendary waters which had once arisen to set a curse on the course of man."<sup>2</sup>

Rain, rain, rain; water, water, water. The fluid so free that it *is* the metaphor of freedom, and as such, it brings forth other metaphors in its constant flow that ushers in its paradoxical roles of life and spirit. As life, it flows through us and is most of us; as spirit, it overcomes us in its propensity, as many Romantics saw at many seas' edge, to become sublime. Yet, even water suffers disruptions.

"Slime," wrote Jean-Paul Sartre, "is the agony of water."<sup>3</sup>

Sartre has written of the bourgeois consciousness, a consciousness so caught in its own desire to be unbound that it lives itself, literally, as if it has no flesh. Such a consciousness convinces itself of radical freedom, where it becomes "complete" transcendence. Yet, such a notion is a delusional existence, and like all delusions, it requires much to maintain itself. It suffers and shifts, eventually, from the agonal to the agonizing. It creates that which clings, leech-like, to each of its moments. Sartre continues: "[Slime] presents itself as a phenomenon in process of becoming; it does not have the permanence within change that water has but on the contrary represents an accomplished break in a change of state. This fixed instability in the slimy discourages

possession. . . . The slimy flees with a heavy flight which has the same relation to water as the unwieldy earthbound flight of the chicken as to that of the hawk. Even this flight can not be possessed because it denies itself as flight. It is already almost a solid permanence. Nothing testifies more clearly to its ambiguous character as a 'substance in between two states' than the slowness with which the slimy melts into itself" (*ibid*).

When I first read that passage from Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, I wondered about the historical significance of his reflection. If slime is the agony of water, and if history moves like an unyielding river or, as it is often characterized, *tide*, then what might be the agony wrought by its recent, epochal flow? What, in other words, is the agony of modernity?

The little boy suffers in Lamming's novel. He and many from the community of his childhood suffer the agony of modernity. It is agonizing because it promises that which it is not prepared to give without a costly price. The water first rained down as an omen, and then it was poured on him—witness the washing in the pail in the succeeding chapter (perhaps the dirt from his body symbolizing what is to be washed away while he is expected to remain?)—while the man whose tragedy, as Frantz Fanon kept reminding us through Friedrich Nietzsche albeit ultimately via Jean-Jacques Rousseau, is carried through this child looks ahead, hopes, and dreams. He faces this world promised to him by empire, and he walks through it with faith in humanity that stimulates any one who still believes in promises. But that world, he discovers, is a slimy one. Richard Wright reflected on that world as one that constantly generates illicit humanity. For him, Bigger Thomas was its agony, and even though such structural imposition never meant an absence of responsibility, there was always the sense that such responsibility was elusive at every moment the inner-man confronted a world in which he appeared locked in perpetual childhood.<sup>4</sup> Wright subsequently raised the question of the modern alienation that militated against responsibility through the constant force of innocence. Perpetual guilt takes away agency, which militates against guilt. It collapses upon itself and renders such guilt "innocence."<sup>5</sup> "But Jesus called them unto him, and said, 'Suffer [allow] little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of Heaven,'" wrote Luke

(18:16), but this makes the black condition one of double jeopardy—the salvation of becoming a man or a woman promises damnation here, but remaining locked as the innocent child for the sake of biblical salvation is a paradoxical form of condemnation.

Lamming's child, who is the young Lamming, faces the governing, dual roles of water. Its duality is marked, literally, in the shores of Barbados, which border a sea and an ocean. It is there in the many canals and gutters of that island, whose collective description, one of imitation, cast a shadow over its inhabitants' identity: "Barbados or Little England was the oldest and purest of England's children."<sup>6</sup> An entire island that is a child. Such is the way of colonial identities. They are always new, which reconfigures the old. In times past, there were inhabitants whose fate were already washed away by what the tides brought in from Europe. In that death was born, allegorically, the new. It occasioned labor to maintain commerce. It occasioned the economy, the identities, the people, the New World. And in spite of its age, it seemed never to grow up. A world of children of all ages. And as children, always innocent *because* always guilty. As children, none of them are fathers, which means, in effect, that there are no fathers among them. There are mothers by virtue of having been born to them, but no fathers. Fathers, as Lamming recounts, follow the tide of employment to distant shores. Fathers, if they stay, bring forth allegories of death through the silence their presence occasions in a world of children. No Oedipus complex here, Fanon, Lamming's Francophone neighbor, recounted. How could an Oedipus complex emerge in a world antipathetic to the emergence of genuine adults?

To become an adult, one must let some things go. The allegory of Mr. Foster echoes this insight under the torrents:

"And Mr. Foster?" my mother inquired.

"I was coming to that," answered the neighbor. "Foster swear he won't leave the old house, and went sailing down the river on the roof" (p. 6).

Foster forgot that so long as he stood on weak foundations, he will be washed away. Many themes of black existentialism permeate this remarkable text. Black existentialism, as the name states, is existence understood through the human condition in black. Insight into this perspective could be found in the etymology of "existence," which is from the Latin *ex*

*sistere*, which means, literally, to stand apart or to stand out. This makes existence more than being. Something could be anywhere, but for it to exist, it has to be “here” or “there.” It has to emerge. Even if from nowhere, it appears somewhere. Black existentialism is about the emergence of black folk from the abyss of nothingness or, worse, irrelevance. But more, since black people did not exist as black people until the interplay of special historic forces, black existentialism is marked by the situated struggle with those forces. They are paradoxical forces, for black people would not have existed without them, and yet, they are the very conditions the overcoming of which would constitute black liberation. There is, in other words, an imperative from *within* black realities that call for the seemingly contradictory aims of their overcoming and maintenance. The water needs wash away much, save the blackness without which is left nothing.

Black existentialism exemplifies the reflections on the humanity of black people, and with such reflections have emerged a unique grammar and tone. Together, they constitute the blues that are the leitmotif of the modern condition. Black existentialism has occasioned them through a variety of autobiographical texts. In Frederick Douglass’s narratives, for instance, there is the boyhood relationship with a mother suffering the contingencies of a history that treats her and her children as irrelevant yet managing to create situations marked by the intimacies of the human face; there is an effort to reach out through the powerful force of words and reason only to be met by the dialectical limits of an external world that attempts to beat down the spirit of this growing upsurge of freedom; the intimacies of love that promises redemption but not escape; and the search for a talisman for freedom—the sign, the magical transformation of symbols, the semiosis of imagination and conjuring—only to be met by tearful transformation of the self in the face of reality. In these movements, the black subject faces anguish, freedom over the constitution of the self, under the bitter irony of bondage. What, black existentialists ask, in the resounding cry of W.E.B. Du Bois, is the meaning of such suffering?

Du Bois felt that such suffering brought, like the proverbial poet, the spiritual leitmotif necessary for an age heavily in danger of losing its soul. The two souls of which he wrote lived a dialectic between the hegemonically real and reality. It is, in effect, the

situation of struggling to liberate even the pre-reflective understanding of itself that poses the problem of the self as a problem self. Du Bois realized that this meant to be a problem, and Lamming, through the subtle reflection on a saturated childhood, experienced the same: “The image of the enemy, and the enemy was My People. My people are low-down nigger people. . . . The language of the overseer. The language of the civil servant. The myth had eaten through their consciousness like moths through the pages of ageing documents. Not taking chances with you people, my people. They always let you down. Make others say we’re not responsible, we’ve no sense of duty That’s what the low-down nigger people do to us, their people. Then the others say we’ve no sense of duty. Like children under the threat of hell-fire they accepted instinctively that the others, meaning the white, were superior, yet there was always the fear of realizing that it might be true. This world of the others’ imagined perfection hung like a dead weight over their energy” (*In the Castle of My Skin*, pp. 20–21).

The invisibility spoken of here is a function of a profound familiarity. It is the paradox of invisibility by virtue of being looked at but not seen. It is a theme throughout black existential literature; witness Ralph Ellison’s bringing it to the fore in his classic novel’s title, *Invisible Man*, which, too, charts the epic of a single black life as a life of the black. Ellison’s protagonist, also a function of the New World, went black and blue through the interstices of modern rural and urban life. Realizing that his humanity wasn’t a given, he searched for it and thereby exemplified the form of an existent seeking its essence. While these existential tropes from realization of one’s responsibility for one’s way of being in the world and the ensuing struggle of a black subject with language; love; the body; double consciousness of a white world and a black one; recognition; a skewed social world against which to fight tend to be portrayed through an *individual* being—a single protagonist—in the North American writers, they take on the form of an almost transcendental subjectivity made flesh in Caribbean writers such as Frantz Fanon and Lamming toward an aim of collective and existential revolt. Witness *Black Skin, White Masks*, where Fanon’s *le Noir* and *le Nègre* (“the Black” and “the Nigger”), where the realization of being a “white construction” leads to an epic journey of failures through



which is learned the pitfalls of narcissistic self-deception and the over-determining dynamics of language; the impact of the social world on the psychodynamics of love; the ideological deception of constitutional inferiority; the cat-and-mouse game of historicism, Reason, and aesthetic-semiological resistance; the problem of psychopathology where white normativity militates against a coherent notion of black normality; the errors in a dialectics of recognition with a black subject; and the encomium for the body to transcend the “epidermal schema.” One could easily be led to reflecting on what was going on in the Caribbean *Zeitgeist* to stimulate such poetic reflections on *skin*. It is there in the title of Lamming’s first novel. We should reflect on the problem of skin, for it is not as though the remedy for the social misrepresentation of skin is to be “skinless.” Skin holds us together, it protects us, as Lamming’s use suggests when he recounts, “The likenesses will meet and make merry, but they won’t know you, the you that’s hidden somewhere in the castle of your skin” (p. 292). Yes our skin is supposed to protect us, so when it becomes our enemy, the effect could be as with blood; we struggle against that which we cannot do without. To be imprisoned by our skin requires, as Fanon later reflected at the end of *Les damnés de la terre*, the emergence of a new man—“Let’s start anew [literally, get a new skin (*peau neuve*)], Comrades, and set afoot a new man”—which brings to mind the constant awareness in all expressivist and dialectical theories of the human, that the human being needs a human world, but such a world stands, as Fanon observed, as promissory “yes” in the midst of a contemporary realization of “no.”<sup>7</sup> The circumstance of a social world that militates against its sociality, against its intersubjective reaching out that constitutes a human world, is claustrophobic. Black existential writers, whether they be of the American varieties such as Wright and Ellison—to which I would add Baldwin and Morrison of *Bluest Eye*—and Fanon and Lamming bring to the fore that the contradictions we live are of a systemic nature, true, but that does not mean that there cannot be a humanistic resolve to assert the value of humanity, as did our ancestors against worst odds.

The water-laden world of *Castle* eventually overflows in revolt, but as in Sartre’s admonitions, prescience in the African Diaspora met in the coincidence of Frazier, Fanon, and Lamming on the tragic pitfalls of black leadership’s path from the colonial to the

ensuing neocolonial, in a word, *slime*. Behold:

“What do you think about Mr. Slime?” I asked. I wanted to hear him further on the land. Perhaps I wanted to form an opinion myself [of the consequences of Mr. Slime’s intervention at the moment of the villager’s fury against the landlord’s and overseers’ actions against them].

“I don’t have to think much ’bout him,” said Trumper. “An’ I not at all surprised that he do what he do. ’Tis what I learn in the States, an’ I know how to handle all the Slimes that come my way. Way back he promise that he’d make these people here owners o’ this land. He tell them there wasn’t nothing to prevent them buying this lan’, and he wus right, ‘cause I know for a fact that the very money that go in that Penny Bank an’ Society buy this land in his name. That’s what I know. Nothin’ he do ain’t surprise me.”

“There are others involved,” I said. “I know some of them.”

“Course there is,” said Trumper. “There’s always more’n one in this kind o’ deal. They ain’t surprise me. The man who set me thinkin’ is the landlord. I don’t quite understan’ why he take that risk. He take a good risk” (p. 323).<sup>8</sup>

We needn’t here recount the history of what became the national bourgeoisie in African and Caribbean neocolonial politics. Although Sartre’s aim is a phenomenological description of an ontological category and Lamming’s is explicitly *political*, we see here a meeting of ontological, psychological, and political description in Sartre’s 1943 description:

But the slimy offers a horrible image; it is horrible in itself for a consciousness to *become slimy*. This is because the being of the slimy is a soft clinging, there is a sly solidarity and complicity of all its leech-like parts, a vague, soft effort made by each to individualize itself, followed by a falling back and flattening out that is emptied of the individual, sucked in on all sides by the substance. A consciousness which became slimy would be transformed by the thick stickiness of its ideas. From the time of our upsurge into the world, we are haunted by the image of a consciousness which would like to launch forth into the future, toward a projection of self, and which at the very moment when it was conscious of arriving there would be slyly held back by the invisible suction of the past and which would have to assist in its own slow dissolution in this past which it was fleeing, would have to aid in the invasion of its project by a thousand parasites until finally it completely lost itself (*Being and Nothingness*, p. 778).

### **Looking onward from such grounds**

The message of an existential analysis is the elimination of human-nature discourses

in favor of those premised on the human condition. The human condition, anchored in reality, takes the mechanisms of nature seriously, as Lamming observes in his reflection on culture in his interview with David Scott. But as the very existential early Marx, approvingly cited by Lamming, observes, “If we assume man to be man, and his relation to the world to be a human one, then love can be exchanged only for love, trust for trust, and so on.”<sup>9</sup> Marx is, of course, speaking of what it means to live in a human world; a world that is a function, fragile though it may be, of things *only* human. It is in stream with reflections found in Hannah Arendt’s *Human Condition*, where the divisions of labor, work, and action affect the tenor of societies in which any one dominates. Labor is a function of biological necessity; no labor, no life. Work, however, is the activity of making worlds. It is the realm of the imagination, the realm of the artist or what it means to be in a creative relation to one’s life’s tasks. And action is the condition for risk, glory, and power, where words meet deeds to manifest her meaning of the political. Crucial in this schema is the importance of thought and the ongoing process of thinking and their necessary relationship with the political.

It is a mistake to read an existential analysis as an over-individualized ideology of the libertarian vein. The bad faith manifested by such a position rests on its denial of the necessary conditions for its assertion. Individuals make no sense without a community from which and in which to be differentiated. So, too, is community. Collectivisms that reject any notion of an individual upsurge collapses into mere aggregates of distinct units that do not meet. To “meet” requires sociality, which requires an intersubjective, ever-changing whole. But this dynamic reality is a function of communication and language. Denying the reality of such phenomena and their necessary relationship to the kinds of beings we are lead to performative contradictions. The performative contradiction in denying social reality is that “denial” is communicative, is outward directed, even where the reference is to the self, which makes it social. It is, in other words, a social rejection of the social. Another form of denial are the conditions through which denial can be advanced in the first place. One of these is the notion of a human nature. The advancement of a nature leads to the notion of law-like structures on human action before such actions are

made. The problem is that it places our relation to structures as the cart before the horse. Structures set the conditions for us, but they do not determine what we *will* do and the meaning of our various projects in life. This is so by virtue of many of us doing different things and creating new forms of meaning in structurally similar, if not same, circumstances. The human world is, in other words, *lived*, and it is creatively so. Appeals to individual natures won't help in such cases since the observer would need prior cases to establish *this* instance as part of a series that constitutes a nature. It is a contradiction of terms. An individual nature by definition pertains only to this individual, which means its status as a law of action or identity cannot be advanced beyond itself, and even to itself it becomes limited since it would have to create such a separation of self from self.

The social world is the foundation of the political one, but both worlds are achievements at each moment of the historical unfolding of the human species. The attack on thinking rests in an effort to wipe out the political. We live in an epoch fearful of thinking beings. Its material form is the current disaster of market fundamentalism, where no critical reflection on the market is tolerated. In political economic terms, we are living in the triumph of a labor-centered proliferation of leisure time without cultivating conditions for work and action. Thus, labor-socializing without labor production leads to consumption as our primary relationship with the "outside" world. The result of such activities is a decline those that depend on thought over those that depend, simply, on want. As thinking declines, so does distinction, and where there is no distinction, we collapse under the force of sameness or mandatory sameness (where thinking is indecent). All this amounts to a new form of what in days past would simply be called totalitarianism. Ours is a world of *market totalitarianism*, a world in which there is literally no room for any other alternative formulation of the human spirit. And where thought cannot experience rupture or difference, then it projects itself as no longer conditioned but *determined*. In effect, a very inhuman conception of the human has begun to take form beyond the mechanisms of exploitation to that of solidification, to that of wiping away the human as possibility into the human as fact. This collapse, the rendering of the human as law-governed, complete and concluded, brings to the fore the double-pronged battle of which

Fanon warned nearly half a century ago. We need new material conditions in which to live. But we need new concepts *by which* to live.

The black existential turn brings with it, then, a carillon call for constantly renewed and revalued practices of freedom. In that task, we have indeed been fortunate to have George Lamming as one of our best allies in our continued struggle to build such a path to a genuinely postcolonial condition.

## Notes

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1. David Scott, "The Sovereignty of the Imagination: An Interview with George Lamming," *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism* no. 12 (September 2002): 112.
2. George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin*, introduction by Richard Wright (New York: Collier Books, 1970), pp. 1–2. Originally published in 1953.
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated with an introduction by Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), p. 774.
4. See Richard Wright, *Native Son*, introduction by Richard Wright and additional introduction by Arnold Rampersad (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998 ).
5. See the conclusion of Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953).
6. *In the Castle of My Skin*, p. 32.
7. For discussion of humanity as a "yes" versus a "no," see Fanon's introduction to *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1952), and for his resolute call to shed our skins and set afoot a new humanity, see the concluding paragraph of *Les damnés de la Terre*, préface de Jean-Paul Sartre, présentation de Gérard Chaliand (Paris: François Maspero éditeur S.A.R.L, 1961); Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1991).
8. See also his reflection on this character in his 2002 interview, pp. 112–113.
9. Lamming Interview, p. 180; Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 379.